

Andrea Richards, *TC Daily Planet*

Standing amid piles of two-by-fours and men and women in bright red worker hats, Sue Haigh, president of Habitat for Humanity in the Twin Cities, asked three local elected officials and city leaders, "What will you build?" On October 4, they had gathered on York Avenue in Saint Paul for the 27th annual World Habitat Day. The city leaders spoke about the need for public investment in affordable housing initiatives and the need for community members to ask this question to each other.

Twin Cities Habitat has gathered some 2000 volunteers for the Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter Work Project this week. Habitat for Humanity not only works with cities and neighborhood corporations to choose sites for renovation and community development, but they enable tenants and neighborhoods to build a stronger community and take ownership of where they live.

"One of the things I really love about Habitat for Humanity is we learn from the very earliest ages that you've got to be part of giving back to your community, of making sure that everyone has a decent safe affordable place to live," Mayor Chris Coleman said at Monday's press conference.

Congresswoman Betty McCollum said also at the press conference that she knows "the positive impact Habitat for Humanity has in our area: stable affordable housing that gives families a sense of permanence in their communities, provides a sense of security and opportunity and mostly, hope."

The East Side Community Development Company (ESCDC) is working in tandem with the Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter Work Project for the Payne-Phalen neighborhood in Saint Paul. The neighborhood was hit particularly hard by the foreclosure crisis, which started in 2006 and has forced hundreds of people out of their homes.

"Our organization saw unprecedented foreclosure and abandonments and so we started looking for partners who would help us," ESCDC Executive Director Mari Bongiovanni said, "One of the things that attracted Habitat to our neighborhood was that we had community-driven plans and community involvement in the decision making." The ESCDC went door to door to survey what the circumstances of the members of the community were and what exactly needed to be done to help the neighborhood recover.

Since the East Side neighborhood was chosen by Habitat, the two have collaborated to choose which homes would be renovated or rebuilt. "The community corporations actually identified potential lots; our role was to give the community a voice in choosing what they wanted for their neighborhood," said Bongiovanni. The ESCDC even produces community development projects using the Neighborhood Quality of Life plan, consisting of "community engagement projects so people get to know each other rather than be isolated with their problems so people learn to develop their own leadership skills and learn to be involved in collaborative projects."

According to Bongiovanni, "Our part of the formula is to give the community a voice and help the community have a place at the table for making the decisions with Habitat for Humanity and the city."

Congresswoman Betty McCollum echoed this dedication to community involvement saying, "We come together as community. ... I know the positive impact Habitat for Humanity has in our area: stable affordable housing that gives families a sense of permanence in their communities, provides a sense of security and opportunity and mostly, hope."

To bring attention to peoples' commitment to investing in stronger, safer, and more livable communities, Habitat for Humanity will be sending a photo petition to President Obama, where all kinds of people-community members, volunteers, city leaders, children, teenagers, seniors-will write their response to the "What will you build?" question on a small white board and get their picture taken.

"We are one part of a worldwide effort to make sure that everyone has a safe and decent place to call home," Haigh said. "We can eliminate poverty housing and we can create safe homes for everyone in this world."